



## THE AGITATOR NETWORK

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Bulletin for trade union and workplace activists - Produced by Workers Power supporters

# All the way for 30k Support your firefighters!

A national strike by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) will get enormous support from workers throughout Britain. The days when politicians could claim that strikes were "outdated", "unpopular" and that unions were "out of touch" are long gone.

Public sector workers are fed up of being told they are "wreckers" by the likes of Tony Blair. They work incredibly hard to keep what is left of the public sector going and they get rewarded with lousy pay, threats of privatisation or "modernisation" (Blairspeak for job cuts) and insults. Now they are striking back - in force.

The firefighters, with their strike ballot now underway, are at the forefront of this battle with New Labour. The dangerous work they undertake, the expertise and professionalism of their job and the importance of the service they perform for the whole community more than justifies their claim for £30,000. Yet Blair has denounced this claim as "unrealistic" and has set up an "independent" (actually a government appointed) review of the entire service which aims to link any pay rise to "modernisation". New Labour's review is a provocation. It demonstrates that the government wants to fight and defeat the firefighters. That way Blair hopes he can push through his modernisation and privatisation agenda for the whole public sector, at the expense of our wages, our jobs and our working conditions.

But the FBU has the power, organisation and support to scupper Blair's plans and spearhead a public sector revolt that will leave Tony and his cronies wondering what has hit them. The campaign so far - huge demos, road blockades, occupations of local fire service authority meetings - has shown that FBU members are not only up for a fight but are willing to use militant tactics to wage it. And when the FBU strike starts solidari-

ty will pour in. Bob Crow's announcement that he would bring out London Underground and other rail workers in support of the firefighters is brilliant news. And it has sent Labour and the bosses into panic mode. After all, this sort of solidarity was what the anti-union laws were meant to put an end to. Every worker in every sector should be combing their health and safety regulations to see if they can pull action on a similar basis. Solidarity action alongside the firefighters will bring a rapid victory.

French firefighters and rail workers who work at the channel tunnel have also promised that no trains will run from their side of the channel during any dispute.

But solidarity short of strike action is vital too. In every area local trade unionists, Socialist Alliance members, anti-capitalist youth, student activists and other community campaigners should go to their community fire stations, contact the FBU there and discuss ways of organising practical support for the FBU strike.

We can run systematic collections for a strike fund, set up picket rotas to help build mass pickets against the full scale army scab operation being planned, build for local demos, occupations, fundraising events and stunts. The framework for support committees can be built now.

But the most effective form of solidarity, as one firefighter told us, is for other public sector workers "to bring forward their claims, organise their ballots and all strike together". We can begin to build for this by using the firefighters' dispute to help create rank and file public sector alliances to co-ordinate action and work towards a public sector strike against low pay, modernisation and privatisation.

## WHAT KIND OF ACTION?

The FBU conference on 12 September agreed to ballot for "discontinuous action". In other words the strike will not be - at least to begin with - an indefinite strike. This is not surprising. There hasn't been an all out indefinite national strike by any section of workers for over a decade in Britain. But this is largely to do with the cowardice of the union leaders who don't want a serious fight. Why are partial strikes a problem for trade unionists who want to win?

- Discontinuous action lets the employers know how long they will face disruption - they make contingency plans and simply sit things out until work is resumed and things go back to normal

- Discontinuous action can end up wearing out the membership - with each separate strike more and more workers start asking "what's the point?", and the action starts to lose support

- Discontinuous action risks unnecessarily prolonging the dispute actually costing firefighters a lot more in lost pay over a long period than they would lose in a short sharp, well organised and well supported all out, indefinite strike.

Continuous action could bring Blair and the employers to their knees in no time. The cost of their scabbing operation will be a huge drain on their finances. They won't want to prolong that, especially given the war plans. The fact that most people would see the strike as justified and solidarity would be widespread would place responsibility for any tragedies that occurred as a result of a strike - emergency cover notwithstanding - at the door of the government. That is something Blair wouldn't want to shoulder for very long. Above all an indefinite strike would bring the whole membership into concerted and determined action, would demonstrate to the employers and the government that the union is deadly serious and could inspire other sections of workers to move into action alongside the firefighters forcing the government to retreat from its whole "modernisation" agenda.

The commitment of Blair to beating the FBU means that in order to win the full claim indefinite action is very likely to be needed in the not too distant future. Militants should start campaigning for it now so that when the time comes the membership are prepared for it.



## For a Public Sector Alliance

# They say warfare - We say welfare!

By Pete Weller, Branch Secretary of Goldsmiths UNISON (in a personal capacity)

Members of the public sector union, Unison, who provide support services in the "old" (pre-1992) universities in London staged a one-day strike on Thursday 26 September.

The employers have refused to make any increase at all in London Weighting, that part of our wages that is supposed to reflect the costs of living in an expensive city like London. This allowance has not been increased since 1992!

The strike action was called by the London Regional Higher Education Committee and was aimed to cause maximum disruption during registration week.

The likelihood now is that a second day of action will take place in mid-November when all the higher education unions will join with teachers in the NUT in a strike right across the education sector in London.

On 26 September at Goldsmiths College in south east London pickets were successful in turning away the post and other deliveries and caused severe disruption to many parts of the college. Pickets also distributed leaflets to the students explaining the reasons for the dispute. These were very well received and many NUS members joined the picket lines during the course of the day.

The dispute is enabling this particular Unison branch to re-build its strength very rapidly. A whole new layer of members outside the ranks of the branch committee were active on the day and it is hoped that some of these people will quickly become shop stewards and participate more regularly in the activities of Unison.

However, there are still some problems to be addressed by activists on the ground. Perhaps the most serious is that

the next day of action is now over six weeks away and it is going to be very hard to maintain the momentum of the dispute. The long gaps in activity also make it very difficult for rank and file activists to loosen the grip that the trade union officials generally have on the dispute at the moment. The United Left is still very weak and cannot yet offer an alternative leadership. In these circumstances, the likelihood of a very moderate offer by the employers being sponsored by the bureaucrats is a real concern.

Already discussions held on the picket lines at Goldsmiths College have suggested that if the dispute follows the pattern of a series of one-day strikes drawn out over a long period of time then this will severely test the patience of many activists.

While it is true that many of the lowest paid members are already very concerned about losing pay, there is a growing understanding in our ranks that we need to be prepared to escalate the action quite rapidly if the employers show no sign of shifting their position. Members are generally prepared to lose some money now if they know they are pursuing a strategy that is likely to deliver a significant increase in the future. What they will not want to do is to fritter money away in a series of increasingly futile one-day strikes.

Given that local government workers are also staging a series of one day strikes in London over the same issue (and they are in the same union as us!) it is obvious that we need to develop rank and file links between the different sectors in order to plan and co-ordinate our struggles. When we do have one day strikes they should take place on the same day. And if the bosses still refuse to meet our claim we set our sights on launching all out indefinite action to make them think

again.

At Goldsmiths the management has said that it is sympathetic to Unison's case but they cannot afford to make any offer at all unless the government provides extra funding. At a time when Tony Blair is preparing to waste enormous sums of money on a war with Iraq, Unison members should feel very confident about arguing the case for an increase in funding, not just in higher education, but across the public sector as a whole.

## Sweethearts get divorced

Sir Ken Jackson, the former leader of the engineering union - now known as Amicus AEEU - made his name negotiating no-strike, single union "sweetheart deals" in all sorts of factories and workplaces. He even managed to get one at the Western Mail, at the expense of the print and media unions who traditionally represented workers there.

Ken Jackson turned the union into a fan club for Britain's bosses, selling members' wages and conditions down the river.

This was the main reason that Blair's favourite union leader was recently voted out by the members. In came Derek Simpson, a left Labour outsider who was given no chance by either Jackson or the media. He promptly defeated Jackson in the election to general secretary and promised to make the union a union once again.

The Agitator is against relying on any union officials, even left wing ones. But we do give credit where credit is due and Derek Simpson is due credit for tearing up one of Jackson's no strike deals at Honda, in Swindon, and will do the same with dozens of others, including the Western Mail.

Now he needs to follow this through by ensuring that strong democratic and rank and file controlled union branches and stewards committees are built in the workplaces so that everything Jackson sold off to the bosses can be won back.

## Tube: What's disgusting? Union busting!

Misery for Londoners. Tube chaos. Travel hell. Commuters struggle to work. Strikers ate my baby.

These are the headlines the papers have ready and waiting every time London Underground workers go on strike (okay, so we made the last one up).

The truth is the tube strikes are popular with London's workers. They know that Labour's plans to privatise the underground system will be a disaster - a real recipe for permanent travel chaos in the capital. And they know that the tube workers are dead set against this harebrained scheme.

The recent strikes show that the workers have the potential to stop privatisation altogether. During the September strike:

- Out of 600 drivers (RMT and Aslef) only 15 scabbed
- Cross union unity meant that every single one of London's 12 lines was shut down completely - not one train moved
- The strike cost the bosses an estimated

£60 million in 24 hours.

The strikes are over pay. London Underground has imposed a 3% deal on the workforce and has refused to negotiate. It says its pay award is not up for negotiation at all. The unions are demanding 5.7% and a move towards the 35 hour week and have offered to take the matter to arbitration. The bosses say there is nothing to arbitrate. They will not budge from 3%.

They had offered 3.2% but withdrew this when the unions rejected the one condition the bosses insisted on - a no strike deal.

This cynical manoeuvre exposes the lie that it is the tubeworkers who are causing the strike. LUL bosses have provoked this battle in an attempt to weaken the unions' massive public support before privatisation can be implemented. It's crude union-busting.

Tubeworkers need to cotton onto this, link the issues and mobilise the huge well of support that exists for them - on the picket lines, on the streets and in public rallies.

## THE AGITATOR NETWORK

The Agitator wants to advertise and build solidarity for all workplace and trade union struggles - please send your stories in.

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# Bush's "enemy within" strikes back!

The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) is in dispute with the USA's dock employers over a new contract. Threats of a lockout by the employers were issued on 19 September in response to what they claimed was a go-slow by dockers (longshore-workers).

The shipping companies plan to install new technology that will eliminate many jobs. The union wants to assure jobs running new technology for existing union members and ensure that newly created jobs are then included in an ILWU contract.

The West Coast ports handle more than half of the nation's trade, around \$300 billion worth of cargo each year. A waterfront shut-down - either a strike or a lockout - could paralyse Pacific Rim commerce.

The Bush government said that it will block a West Coast dockers' strike by any means necessary. Claiming national security and the "war on terrorism" as a pretext, Bush is looking for an excuse to add a strategic victory over "the enemy within" - as Margaret Thatcher used to call the British workers' movement - to his hoped for victory over Saddam Hussein.

Because of their location the 10,500 dock workers on the West Coast have a traditionally strong union and a negotiation system covering 29 ports right along the West Coast. Dockers have played a key role in recent labour and anti-capitalist protests, including demonstrations and strikes, such as during the Seattle protests at the WTO conference in 1999.

Two months ago, the ILWU revealed that Bush was prepared to mobilise the National

Guard to take over ports, bring in Navy personnel to move cargo and petition the US Congress to declare the ILWU a monopoly, thereby legalising the break-up of the union into 29 separate bargaining units for each port.

The President of "the land of the free" has considerable powers under the Labor Management Relations Act of 1947 - better known as the Taft-Hartley Act. He can ban a strike or lockout for 80 days and impose arbitration. All he needs is to proclaim that it would "imperil the national health or safety." By showing such eagerness to intervene, Bush has given encouraged the shipping companies to refuse the union's demands.

Stevedoring Services of America (SSA) the largest of the dock employers has systematically blocked negotiations between the ILWU and Pacific Maritime Association (PMA.) SSA wants to move as much work away from unionised sectors as possible. It has moved several hundred ILWU jobs off the West Coast docks in recent years.

Bush and the employers clearly want to smash the International Longshore and Warehouse Union just as Ronald Reagan smashed the air traffic controllers union Patco in 1981. This defeat led to nearly twenty years of falling real wages and shrinking unions.

American labour has only just begin to recover from that defeat. Now Bush wants to use recession and war to knock them down again. Dockers, wharfies, longshoremen - whatever the name - have played a key role in international solidarity over the last decade. All workers around the world should prepare for a massive movement of solidarity with the ILWU the moment a strike or lockout starts.

## Casualisation kills

A 16 year old worker at MacDonalds is forced to do a 16 hour shift late into the night before an exam - MacDonalds makes £3 million more a year by paying young workers the minimum wage youth rate.

Simon Jones, a university student, takes a year off and is forced by the Benefits Office to work on the Shoreham Docks with no training. He is killed three hours after starting work. His death is down to illegal working conditions at the docks, but the company gets off with a fine and the manager responsible for Simon's death walks free.

These are examples of the trend towards non-unionised workplaces, part-time and temporary contracts at the expense of permanent jobs, and falling wages and conditions - CASUALISATION. It means cheap labour and big profits for the bosses, low pay, danger, no union representation and insecurity for us.

In Sheffield Agitator supporters got together with other anti-capitalist campaigners to kick off an Anti-Casualisation Campaign. We started with a showing of the "Not This Time" video about Simon Jones, and 30 people who showed up decided to stick together and start doing something about it.

So far we have held a mock trial in the high street to highlight deaths at work - because Simon Jones protestors were up on possible prison charges for a peaceful protest about his death, after the manager went free!

The trial got a good response especially from teenagers. Now we are looking to show the Simon Jones video in a big cinema along with the Navigators, the Ken Loach film about rail workers. We are also planning a protest on International Anti-McDonalds Day, and building to support the firefighters when they go out on strike.

Last year 295 people were killed at work in Britain and there were nearly 28,000 serious injuries. The average pay out for a work related death by the bosses is a measly £2000.

This is the sharp end of casualisation - people literally dying for a job. New Labour promised a law against "corporate manslaughter" - but now it is backtracking. It's not going to go forward till 2004 at the earliest, and till then there are "consultations" with big business.

We know what big business want - more cheap labour and less health and safety at work. We aim to fight them. Stop casualisation - organise the unorganised!

If you want a copy of our anti-casualisation leaflet to use in your local area, then get in touch.

Call Simon on: 07752 627 753

## Sign up for the European Social Forum

In November Florence will host the largest gathering of anti-capitalists Europe has seen since the 1920s. Anti-war campaigners, immigrants, eco-warriors, Cancel the Debt and No Borders activists, trade unionists... are all coming together to share experiences, swap addresses and plot our revenge on the Europe of capital, exclusion and war.

Anti-capitalist artists, musicians and DJs are on hand so we can have fun while we're doing it!

The European Social Forum (ESF) will take place on 7<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> November. Over 30,000 people will be there. But what's it all about? Globalisation, privatisation, "free" trade, casualisation, freedom to pollute and war: this is the neo-liberal agenda. The ESF is about discussing and organising to fight for our alternatives.

Of course the ESF will attract those - like the bureaucrats of the TUC who are backing it - who want merely to tinker at the edges of the problem. But many there will be grass-roots activists, radical youth, militant rank and file trade unionists and revolutionary socialists. There will be a battle of ideas at

Florence about which way forward for the movement. Make sure you're there so your views are heard.

The Agitator hopes to take this opportunity to build up real links between trade unionists across the European Union and Eastern Europe. We have lessons to learn from Spain, Italy and Greece, all of which have seen huge general strikes this year. We want to forge shopfloor ties across the multinationals like General Motors and Ford so that we can co-ordinate our campaigns, action and strikes. We will host a meeting with Argentinian workers who have occupied their factories and operate under workers' control.

The TUC, the communications union CWU, Unison and the Natfhe lecturers' union all support the ESF, along with dozens of local branches, workplaces and trades councils. Make sure your union is sending a delegation too.

Go to [www.mobilise.org.uk](http://www.mobilise.org.uk) and [www.fse-esf.org](http://www.fse-esf.org) or contact the Agitator for further details.



# No blood for oil - defend Iraq!

George Bush and Tony Blair are determined to kill thousands of Iraqi civilians in pursuit of the vast oil reserves of the Middle East. That is the only conclusion any sane person can draw from the events of the last two months.

Unlike recent wars in the Balkans and Afghanistan, this time there is no humanitarian cause to hide behind. Blair's own dossier reveals as much.

- Iraq does not have the capacity to make a nuclear bomb, confirmed the International Atomic Energy Authority in June.

- Iraq's chemical and biological weapons from the 1980s are unusable. Suspected sites visited by journalists have only contained powdered milk and sugar.

- Iraq does not pose a threat to world peace. Saddam has just 12 medium range missiles, says the dossier. In 1991 it had 819 - yet was unable to deliver them for fear of reprisal.

- Iraq has no known links with al-Qa'ida.

None of this is to say that Saddam isn't a monster. He is. His worst atrocities, however, were committed between 1975 and 1990, when he was an ally of the US and Britain. This was when he murdered thousands of communists and trade unionists, drowned up

to 2m Iraqis and Iranians in blood during a pointless war and gassed hundreds of Kurdish villages in 1988.

Why didn't the West demand Saddam disarm then? Because he was pumping out cheap oil, letting Israel do what it liked to the Palestinians and pinning back the Islamists in Iran. Now he is far less of a threat to peace in the region - or even to the people of Iraq - yet he is unreliable. Bush and Blair want a new puppet in charge.

And that's what they'll impose if they win this war.

But it won't be the end of Bush and Blair's endless war against "terrorism". Who'll be next? Iran, Syria, even Saudi Arabia fit the bill. Further afield North Korea in the east and Colombia and Venezuela in the west are possible targets. Bush has even said he wants regime change in Zimbabwe. Right wingers close to George W Bush have named Russia, China and even Germany as potential future "threats" to US global domination.

This warmongering is aimed at frightening every country in the world to open their markets, services and industries to US multinationals, waive labour and environmental protection laws to boost their profits, and accept the USA's right to intervene anywhere it wants.

That's why it is in the interest of every worker in the world to stop this imperialist war... and if it starts, to stand together with the Iraqi people. The saying, "there can be no McDonald's without [arms manufacturer] McDonnell Douglas" means that globalisation needs military aggression to open up the world for its profiteering. To be anti-capitalist today we need also to be anti-imperialist. Let's build on the magnificent 400,000-strong demo of 28<sup>th</sup> September! By linking the anti-capitalist and anti-war movements, together with the new layer of militants in the unions, we can stop this war - and forge an alliance that can turn the tide on the system that breeds war.

## Palestine

Bush and Blair's attitude to Iraq is in stark contrast to their treatment of Israel.

Israel is in breach of over 250 UN resolutions. Resolution 194 (1948) calls for Israel to allow the return of Palestinians ethnically cleansed from their homes. 54 years on, no right to return exists for 3.8m refugees.

Resolution 253 (1967) demands Israel ends its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. 35 years later, Israeli tanks still roam Palestine, Zionist settlers continue to steal Arab land. A further two million refugees have been created by this state terrorism.

The Israeli army is the biggest recipient of US aid and larger and more powerful than any single EU country's. It imposes a 24-hour curfew on thousands. It uses illegal human shields and collective punishment. The Palestinians have rifles, stones and the desperate suicide bombers to fight back with. As a result 1,372 Palestinians have been killed and 19,684 injured in the last two years. Tony Blair has said he will host a new Middle East peace conference in a crude and cruel bid to get Arab support for his war on Iraq. George Bush Snr said the same in 1991 - and look at it now. The 1992 Oslo "peace process" is in tatters. The Palestinians will not get justice from the defeat of the Iraqi people. On the contrary, the defeat of Britain and the US will weaken the Israeli terror machine and embolden Arabs and anti-Zionist Israelis to fight for a workers' state of Palestine where everyone has rights.



RMT leader Bob Crow among the 400,000 opposing the war and supporting the Palestinians on 28<sup>th</sup>

## Unions against the war!

Trade union leaders and Labour MPs have come out against the war. Mick Rix and Bob Crow on the rail, Mark Serwotka and Billy Hayes from the public sector, Jeremy Dear and Paul Mackney representing the journalists and lecturers have all spoken on anti-war platforms. 53 MPs voted against Blair's war motion in the Commons.

This gives us a boost when arguing for action in the workplace. Crow told the TUC, "If there is a war there should be mass protests outside every base". We should use this quote to build for support for the day of direct action called by Stop the War on 31<sup>st</sup> October - where possible, hour-long walk-outs, where not lunch-time rallies. Coupled with this, workplace anti-war groups can link up to block rush-hour traffic, airbases and military ports.

If war does break out the union leaders should move from words to action. They should deliver daily news bulletins telling people what the censors and media careerists won't. They should call protest strikes.

Now is the time to prepare for action. Form an anti-war group in your workplace. Demand your union backs the Stop the War Coalition. Get everyone at work to discuss Bush and Blair's war aims and how to resist them. In short - Educate, Agitate, Organise!

## UN is no solution

The TUC Congress rejected the rail union TSSA's call for opposition to war "with or without UN backing" preferring to tie Tony Blair to getting a fresh UN mandate before attacking Iraq.

This is a mistake.

The United Nations is not democratic. It was designed to - and does - do whatever the big nations tell it. Most the 190 nations in the General Council don't get a vote on war issues. Only the 15-strong Security Council does. Britain, US, France, Russia and China are all permanent members of this Council and each can block any resolution. Through the years the USA has single-handedly blocked countless resolutions to curtail its and Israel's activities.

The other votes can be bought. Chad needs US support for its oil pipeline and will back Bush. Czech Republic wants EU membership and will follow Britain. Even Russia and China can be bought off with debt relief, WTO membership and backing for their own genocides in Chechnya and Tibet.

The UN is a thieves' kitchen. The idea that it will support the Iraqi people against the military and financial might of the USA is laughable. Stop this war, whether the berets are green or blue!